

At Ability Beyond Disability, we discover, build and celebrate the ability in all people.



TESTIMONY – SEPTEMBER 27, 2011 PROGRAM REVIEW AND INVESTIGATIONS COMMITTEE

Senator Fonfara, Representative Rowe, Members of the Committee... Good afternoon,

My name is Tom Fanning. I'm the President of Ability Beyond Disability, one of Connecticut's largest non profit providers of community services for people with disabilities. We provide services for a wide range of people, with relationships with DDS, DSS, DMHAS and DCF.

I have long been a proponent of community services for people with disabilities and have long believed these services can best be provided by the non profit sector. Along with many others, I have testified before various legislative committees about Connecticut's inefficient and duplicative systems for a long, long time.

Over all these years, the debate has been about institutions vs. community services, about privatization vs. public employees. These portrayals have had a polarizing effect, creating debates about issues "around" people with disabilities rather than about people with disabilities. The questions should really be pretty straightforward. How can the most people with disabilities receive the best services given available resources? How can people with disabilities (and the State of Connecticut) get the biggest bang for the buck? Dancing around these questions for decades has resulted in a tremendous waste of energy and has taken millions and millions of dollars away from people with disabilities.

Even now, the issue is gaining attention not because of what makes sense for people with disabilities but because of the financial crisis in which Connecticut finds itself. On the bright side, doing what makes sense for people with disabilities can make a serious contribution to righting Connecticut's fiscal ship.

There have been several legislative task forces like the Commission on Nonprofit Health and Human Services and numerous related studies over the past 20 plus years, seemingly just to delay reaching decisions. It has been clear for a long time that community based services best meet the needs of the vast majority of people with disabilities. It has been clear for a long time that services provided by the private, not for profit sectors are generally of higher quality and more efficient than those provided by the public sector. It has been clear for a long time that public resources have been disproportionately directed to the public sector at the expense of the non profit sector. Underlying all of this, it has been clear that people with disabilities do not have a strong voice that is being heard in Hartford.

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The fiscal crisis may also present another silver lining in this long hovering cloud. The extent and immediacy of the current crisis may force policy changes now that would be inevitable very soon to accommodate the changing demographic makeup of our Country's population. I urge the General Assembly to act now to set clear directions as to how people with disabilities will get the biggest bang for the buck from here on.

Here are a few suggestions.

First, the legislature must finally answer a couple of basic questions. Does the State of Connecticut have a commitment to its most fragile citizens? Assuming the answer to be "yes", the next question is "how can the State best deliver on that commitment to the most people with the resources it has available?" The answer can be found in the report of this Commission and that of several other groups that preceded it: the State can best deliver on its commitment through the provision of services in communities by non profit providers.

In turn, State agencies must develop strategic plans to implement the directions set. These plans can't be just philosophical goal statements and a delineation of needs to be addressed in silos. While plans must be grounded in State policy and sound service philosophy they must be more than that -- they must set measurable goals, with defined outcomes correlated with dollars. There needs to be a fundamental shift from a focus on prescriptive process to outcomes for people. Plans must also go beyond biennial budget cycles -- this is a commitment to people not just a budget plan.

Finally, while being held absolutely accountable for the health and safety of people served, providers should be encouraged to be flexible, creative and innovative. Regulations and paperwork requirements should be limited to what is truly necessary to assure the well-being of people served. The focus needs to be on outcomes for people with disabilities -- improved lives, not dotted "I's".

With this shared commitment, people with disabilities AND the State of Connecticut will start to get the biggest bang for the buck.

Thank you for the opportunity to present my views.